

Hoof or Halo

Undergraduate Creative Thesis

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by

Lauren Ubbing

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Project Advisor: Professor Marcus Jackson, Department of English



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#PRAY4DEATH

*with pieces of Nihilist Arby's tweets*

sentience is strewn everywhere   a flock  
of fuck-ups like you clogging yourself  
with excuses for sustenance   a lugubrious  
loser you are older than

you've ever been   looking down  
in some damp lot your phone says kids have been found  
buried in satanic patterns beneath your god  
father's yard   what a waste of time   you are

a lone fever dream   stuck in  
an ectoplasmic sea of electrons and emptiness   a void  
you satisfy no one   you just want  
to go home your body somewhere under

a naked bulb swaying in the gloom of your bedroom  
where a dawn flash had ripped a mattress on the floor  
where that old man fucked you and you'd started  
dying right away   this will be

your last meal in your mid-90's coup   you make  
the plan   consume until  
you burst   release  
the emergency break   die  
full

## PORTRAIT OF SELF AS FIANCÉE

Thick-tendoned bracts, white rot weft, conks  
and stalactites line the cunt. It's choking on  
promises and old garbage, thrusting ineffectually  
into the grave. A memory, anoxia, its mother  
shutting the door on its finger. Fluid drips  
onto the sheets slippery and wistful. It wilts,  
words spill out of it into the mate's ear: *I want  
to marry you*. They blister, now, open across  
the bone yard, the mate naked except for  
hickies and chipped moonlight. It kisses  
the mate's feet, gnaws the ankles. Amniotic  
crust stunts its emotional intelligence; it curses  
its mother, limps on cloven hooves and looks  
out for closing doors, fingers balled into fists.

## WILDERNESS MAGGIE AND LACIE ALTA: AMERICA'S OLDEST PORN STARS

Old women like to get it on too, boo, more than you'd think—  
it's the middle agers that get downturned lips, keep it zipped.  
Young'uns and us, we know what makes our flat circle time  
spiraling hellscape hot—flaming basements, exploding mold  
spores, lush forests to protect the fuck, perforated roots stroke  
tap our sagging backsides. We have a booze-snooze riverside,  
wake up with farts and lioness stretching-songs—heaven, lady  
it's a Friday! We start a fire with Petoskey stones and sticks,  
dentures snacking on Lays. Ooooh we get off—leather cooch  
smoochin' under a low Nashville-filtered platinum moon. We  
are spinster oldies but we know what's up, kid. Maggie fists my  
arthritic wrist, says strike me, twine my neck, and I agree cuz  
she's a nasty old bitch. I whip. Tell her, sloppy kiss my navel-  
hanging tits, use that overbite you hillbilly bunny whore—  
lightening strikes, limbs fall, the world is raining down,  
thick-lipped toads drop outta storm clouds. Worms pop outta  
damp acidic soil to lick our thighs. Ahhh, the great orgasmic  
outdoors! We barrel role over tangled Juicy sweat suits,  
a freestyle alkaline moss-float. All we need is right here,  
between us—our love boat of cherry brambles and burnt bras,  
heart-shaped hairballs, uncased blind-bat-glasses bouncing—  
they whoops-tumble into the water, ride off into the sun-  
rise on a snapping turtle's back while we doze on the rocky shore.

## MISSED CONNECTION

The morning after, we start up—  
rusty limbs and car alarms, dead  
in bed. I can't see through my right  
eye—irises dry-cry, a colorblind sun  
rise loading above a choked horizon.  
Your violet eyelids glitch, wax-slick  
beside the smudge of spit on the pillow  
we share. Pulsing scarlet lips—magnets.  
I can't feel the silence humming beneath  
interfaces. We are blurred indium slices,  
heavy fetal breathing, morning snorts.  
I'd rather be nothing and with you than  
whole and with myself—I have a glass  
full of splintered gold inside me, no way  
to glue and consume. It abuses, holds me  
in limbo. We are a dance of rare earth  
elements, electric limbic connection, fictive  
pixels pathway-smashing fluorescent heart  
shapes on identical MRIs. Moon scoop  
my goose-bumped hip, transfer the avatar  
vessels that weave your capillaries to me—  
a web I want to tangle my tired flesh around,  
fall asleep in, forever a dumb bundle.

## THE CLEAVERS

*after Andrea Yates*

i.

Cement-chested man, motor  
oil smears on washed-out Levis,  
college tee, all-pupil eyes on  
one sexy subject: a lithe gem  
skinned crucifix, treasure object  
floating a hotel pool in suburban  
outlet mall shades, a conservative girl  
pink one piece and silver filigree,  
her platter face absorbing the sun.

ii.

Channel Seven Satan reveals  
another golden fall  
season to her in the hospital.  
She swaddles me sausage-tight,  
apologizing for reasons  
unknown. No one had seen the butchering

blades she had watched  
the crescent moons on my mobile spin  
into the first night she'd tucked me in,  
and she'd never told anyone—  
she'd had work early the next day.

iii.

She is afraid to hug me  
because she will squeeze too tight.

When we die haloed ladies  
guide us, escort us into new bodies  
and become our new moms.

I'm all grown up and I want to die  
but I don't want my mom.

## BIRTH POEM

i.

I'm in a quaking space  
observatory—moss jam

at the end of a wet maze,  
I wait for death, comatose

eye out for signs  
to wake up, slate

squeezing my neck. Low  
rumble, sable buds, spastic

meditation on the upside  
down cross of my mother

-ship's ovaries. Sharp prongs  
of belly-music rake my nerve

endings. Five-feathered  
knock on my orb's taut gleam,

warmth hovers—fluttering  
paper sky, steady

cotton-tube clouds, stainless  
steel crescent wavers

like a satellite-flash. I am  
waiting—gills seal sticky,

wilted violet gums press hard  
against one another.

ii. The Doctor (Interlude)

His web-veined steady hand had once held  
a scalpel, split a baby girl's labia open to  
release a toxic flesh pebble, fumigate her  
egg-packs, gently peel rind—inflamed skin—  
pinned it into a rose. That hand had been  
an artist's. It couldn't feel the difference  
of material—clay, blade, baby fat, bloody



Band-Aid. The baby girl had slept sound,  
her legs had twitched as she'd dreamt,  
making her new petals tremble. Darling,  
the doctor had said, she will be so grateful  
to have such good parents. The baby's fist  
had grazed her open place, and she'd cried.

iii.

Crown edging light, I tongue the lines  
on his palm and taste the long

fertile life he has ahead of him.  
Camera flash—

a we're-here-flare  
star-shooting over the navel

look-out. I'm half-born, sucking  
the doc's finger. My chord

-wrapped neck slides, head  
a clotted bloom, blocked.

I'm fish-hooked at the lip,  
his slimy glove seems to reach

down my throat. I swallow  
blood, so much veiny lava

I see rising, feel it  
pinch inside my chest, I am

stuck in the revolving mother  
-ship canal. I hear pounding

above and below me—my mom's  
raging arteries. A heart

monitor panics, I take a breath  
and scream, lower half emerging

slow, a salt-flinging seize,  
out of the host.

## POST-BIRTH TRIP

a coast past injury, surfing the high  
way, reclined. empty I-75, needle-strewn. bloated  
doe's leg bones crossed on the gravel shoulder, X  
marking the spot, a blush streak, chapped lip  
of the lane. mom's padded seafoam maternity  
ward socks dissolve to sand  
inside her...shoes  
abandoned at a beach edge. palms wave  
her gently onward, a tingling, tubes straining beneath  
the car's rust-sprinkled hood,  
an illusory crystalline push  
of the tide. a post-party cruise where  
seagulls flock in figure eights around her  
bloodshot eyes as she watches the humping of exhaust  
smoked drifts outside the window  
and kids playing on the overturned yacht of  
an incapacitated millionaire...opiates ease  
her delirium, laid out  
on a polka dot beach towel, her new baby or  
a sag-assed old lady or a bundle of shivering  
seagrass...the vehicle slows...a rasp  
berry burst, the domed airbag  
a parasail crashing into the sun  
fire shooting out her fingertips. she appears  
her credit card and stabs its corner into  
the newborn's knotted navel, piercing the delicate  
membrane. blood trickles out a small hole  
a satellite hurricane slow-mo  
on the screen of a naked stomach, spelling out  
how she'd come from an egg that was not supposed to be  
the first to pearl...stings...her cuts  
sea-washed, the memory of silk hands,  
anonymous mer-women, white-capped, swimming around her  
hospital bed, plopping fish bones into buckets,  
listening to the current  
of the cardiac monitor and mounted TV...  
O.J. Simpson's acquittal, an update on the unusual  
heat wave we're having  
this glorious Midwestern October day  
I was born

## MYCORRHIZA

I'm a flower that needs affection to grow,  
a swollen ovary under duress. Being  
a carnal body means to have a controlled  
hallucination, roots woven inside  
a predictive brain, tugging at their grips,  
steering us, just beast machines  
needing thought to sustain messy feeling  
flesh-bags; we're solely after sex and survival.

You lay on your back for practice, reactive  
fingers stretching toward dangling bone  
-colored nets, you follow the fungi  
superhighway, unconsciously returning  
to the dark, mossy woods in which you grew up.

I know nothing ever happened to you,  
and you have less than me materially, but also  
more than I'll ever have. I couldn't tell at first  
whether I wanted you or whether I wanted to be you,  
and when I discovered that it was the former,  
I had not been sure *how* I wanted you, but

I knew I needed you to touch me so I could feel  
the tender surge of mycelia intersection, so I could  
become from the water with which you filled me.

## PERSEPHONE

My girlfriend's sugary  
cackle distracts  
from my open book because  
I can hear her on the phone  
with her mom, demeanor  
pleasant, checking  
on the harvest she left  
behind—voluptuous  
tomatoes and zuchs  
like alien arms, wormholes  
in the shape of hearts rooting  
along the cradle's cedar  
edges—the light  
from which I dragged her  
further south, back to  
the big bad city.

I'm jealous  
of the words like seeds  
spit between receivers,  
first snow whirling  
inside my skin until  
the infinite blister of living  
with my own mother  
pulses, and I remember  
Persephone tiptoeing  
beside me in the basement  
where my bedroom was,  
and how we'd slap our faces  
to stay awake, watching  
for a slit of light to appear  
beneath the door, which meant  
we weren't safe anymore.

## CLEAVAGE

i.

We were a family,  
young, riding horses  
bareback and barefoot  
together until  
we reached a clearing, and  
my sister slipped  
out our mother's arms.

ii.

I was the last in our ellipsis, paused  
in the shade of the rawboned trees.  
I hadn't seen my father  
bolt past my mother  
to the front, spooking her  
horse, causing her to lose  
her hold on my sister. I hadn't seen  
the hoof or halo poised above her head,  
the metal crashing down on her skull.

ii.

Blood puddled  
in the grassy open  
v of our mother's legs.

I wonder how much  
seeps into the earth...

## CASSETTE PLAYER

My sister and me tiptoeing, matching  
cowgirl bandanas knotted beneath our hair,

hers hiding a bandaged wound,  
mine helping her  
feel less alone.

Me and her whispering  
into a Fisher Price cassette player  
our Mom will lose.

Leaving home and stumbling  
upon a garage sale  
Ouija board,

finding myself in another

dimension, without  
matter.

Even better, my sister and me  
uncovering that cassette player,

childhood's cobwebby arcade.  
We would take its coiled cord

and wrap it around our necks,  
squeeze a song out our chapped throats.

## THE SILENT TWINS

Around the second ring, wet  
canvas flaps. Whip-crack,  
the ringmaster winks  
to my sister, who juggles  
a chainsaw, grandma's  
jewelry and a man's head  
in dim spotlight  
while I writhe rabid  
in the oily dirt  
around her ankles.  
Our mother is cross  
armed, hawking at us  
from the tightrope.  
She pulls a tassel,  
releasing torrential storms  
of Matchboxes and Barbies  
above our heads till lights out.  
Backstage, we listen  
to dopey pop artists  
crack top one hundreds  
on a clock radio, waiting  
for our mother to want us.

## BABES IN THE WOOD

We break Mom's rule because we want to  
shed night cover, and snap two forbidden stems.  
Daddy had made a path so the forest is safe

for us as long as we stay on it. We fist our sun  
flower ends, gum-fuzzy. With bruised knees,  
we break Mom's rule because we want to

stomp porcupine needles, slash automaton carnivores,  
conquer the hill that had cracked my sister's skull—  
Daddy had made a path so the forest is safe,

but it doesn't matter. Wild dogs spit poison before  
our footfalls, thorns bite our bug-clustered ankles.  
We break Mom's rule because we want to

lasso midnight's dewy fangs; we push droopy  
fruit peel petals before our sandaled feet to follow.  
Daddy had made a path so the forest is safe

for us as long as we never stray, and stay his good  
little princesses. We do, twinkle-eyed—nobody cares  
we break Mom's rule because we want to;  
Daddy had made a path so the forest is safe.



## MALUS DOMESTICA

i.

My stepfather walks in circles outside  
pale orbs of streetlights, waiting  
for someone to pierce through  
the flickering ovum, spitting  
tobacco in elegant parabolas.

ii.

My mother, at the mercy of  
a swollen underthirst, swans  
into a littered halo, yanking  
hair out of her scalp.

iii.

My stepfather scuttles around, tongue  
out and dripping; my mother rips  
out a last pinch of hair, her scalp  
radiating, sounds spilling from her  
mouth like invertebrate corkscrews.

iv.

He bursts through the blastocyst,  
a feathery incandescent edge,  
scoops her up, rests his hand  
over her seething lips.

v.

Later, he will creep over to me,  
her oldest daughter, because  
the apple never falls far.

## MY MOM

pushed five kids into a McMansion and told them it was the whole world with doors to devoutly hide behind, high ceilings, grout in clean, pearly lines—the whole we’ve-made-it shebang. She believed what her husband believed with a girlish ferocity. She told her oldest daughters about their dad (who was not her husband)—a dick who didn’t spend a fucking dime to take care of them. Her knuckles were tough from punching walls, her ears sharp from deciding the most effective volume at which to slam a door. She was a waspy ex-bulimic, a doctor of dental surgery as well as Eve’s daughter, gyrating fickle-jointed, the devil’s transformative know-how camped out in her cheek, reminding her of something or someone she’d lost along the way.

## CHERRY

My sister and I want to pop  
out the eyes of my look-a-like American Girl doll.  
We want to worm our fingers into her  
sockets and scrape our nails around her skull,  
her naked cranium, tough  
and untouched as our young selves,  
wanting to take our safety  
scissors to the sternum of the murdered  
porn star from that episode of *48 Hours*  
in which Mom was delighting, drag  
a blade clean to the cursed low-bone  
of the born-female, wanting  
to peak inside our real-life bodies, too. We take  
a marker and penetrate each other, studying  
the angry sheen of our brand-spanking-new sugar pouches.  
I hold the marker like a wand,  
nudging the wings of my sister's vulva  
in search of a small, fully-intact cherry—  
glossy as hard candy, thin as a clip of celluloid  
from my favorite film, *The Little Mermaid*,  
and the remarkable color of a five star slap, crimson,  
lipstick, Winnie the Pooh's shirt, sticky  
with stolen honey, the bunny blood  
smeared across the curb out front, a crab's  
mottled carapace, Ariel's hair when she  
rode with Prince Eric in a rowboat  
beneath the iridescent guillotine  
of the moon, voiceless,  
when he tried to kiss her  
and they capsized.

## SATANODON

The Cretaceous gestates  
in a grade-school cubby.  
A Play-Doh T-Rex tromps  
across a battleground  
diorama, fun size photo  
synthetic breasts and crevices  
I'd sculpted with my Theropod stepfather,  
his gloved hands cupping mine.  
*Your teacher won't know I helped,*  
*deal?* I'd nodded. Fair  
skin firm ass tits  
like mosquito bites he had  
scratched with a ceratoid talon.  
I present my weed-strung shoebox  
to the class, talking fast  
about hominin cranial capacity,  
growing up, extinctions  
and braincase mutations, how  
the planet will keep spinning  
no matter who or what dies, how  
I suspect our joints will one day  
no longer articulate

## THANK YOU, ABSCESS, MY BELOVED

dermoid cyst. It was starting to get hard  
to speak. Your face was dazzling as  
a supermarket apple. I believed  
I was ugly from the inside out, body and soul  
a goiter, an enflamed wing bursting  
out a bruised chrysalis, comically  
flailing. When a doctor popped you,  
pus oozed down my neck. She scratched around  
the hole with a cotton swab, shooting arrows  
up into my eardrums. I felt a snag  
and then an unspooling, like a kite being taken  
by a gust of wind. She pulled out  
an ivory bud no bigger than a Chiclet,  
a parasitic canine, a whistle of misplaced  
bone wrapped in a nest of goopy hair.  
Sometimes teeth will grow incorrect, she told me,  
and hair out wrong follicles, sometimes  
skin gets trapped on its way to becoming  
what it's supposed to be. I wished she was  
my mother, in that moment. She said  
this happens to a lot of people, it's nothing  
to be ashamed of.

## JUST TO HAVE

you I collected fallen bits of lichen  
minty robin's egg-crisp tongues of  
ocean dried coral leaves kinda gummy  
arranged in an impromptu heart scattered  
with invasive knuckle blooms and a couple  
evil eye beads that'd fallen off your bracelet  
I also picked weeds for you shoved them in  
an empty bottle not rinsed beer sticky and  
it was all pretty and you said you really liked  
my heart but nothing is changed in Paris  
when you were lying we scrolled through old  
school photos of you and BFFs back-to-back  
eyes lined black bitty skulls swarming outfits  
that at first glance were summery and sweet  
but later I saw you in some actually laced lovely  
knit florals flowing the exact same clothes  
piled inside a suitcase with all my piss-smelling  
monochrome I thought I know this girl and I  
can't believe it I see that morbid purple cold  
gnawing at your four eyes every year the same  
velvet widow's peak that hairline hums clarity  
burrowing as you snort squeal at a funny one  
every few greasy-thumbed scrolls I miss this  
you and all this I never had and there was ease  
unchecked warm breath ebbing toward outdoors  
I pulled you out of bed and the forest had us  
fogged scraggly city-edge pine and I was one  
big muscle climbing backwards peaking over  
my shoulder to see you I felt the tingle of lightning  
bugs beneath me a baby blue rock carved by fallen  
water long ago I felt like I did at the beginning  
we still had everything to learn about each other

## COVER UP

*after JonBenét Ramsey*

up high she flounces  
tulle, tipping

her skull, laughing  
latex. for her stepdad

she dances  
horizontal, a blister

in the basement  
in her mom's loud hour

glass shadow. she falls  
asleep, spinning

out of a frill  
nightgown, into a garrote

of her own locks. blonde  
evening sun drops

like pollen onto the rose  
baby blanket

with which her stepdad  
covers her

## INCORPOREAL POTION

I secrete it under my tongue  
to be fine when he tickles me  
I have to make him believe  
I like to shut my eyes as I  
clandestine gland-strip potion  
inside a docile jaw I swallow

and go into autopilot  
I seize up my starboard skin  
summery as the seabed with  
vapor-clogged fissures and  
a molten trembling in spite of which  
I have to make him believe  
I like to be tickled even though  
with this potion I can't feel



SUSAN SMITH

Morbid tourists traipse down the death ramp,  
tossing flowers to the memory of your drowned  
children. Their warm foreheads you had, due to  
learned obligation, kissed. *The hardest part*  
*is not knowing if your children are getting*  
*what they need to survive*, you had said after  
survival became overrated. Your stepdad said  
he'd never have touched you had he known  
what you were capable of. What hurts you is  
that people think *you* had known what you were  
capable of, that you murdered to be with a man  
in a mansion. You didn't have that sort of drive,  
living one noxious inhalation to the next; to the  
water's steep edge you had run on fumes, intoxicated  
with possibility, you traded in your car  
and kids.

## MANSION IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

a chandelier sways, depositing  
tungsten blobs of light—  
saturated feathers, salty  
and ovular as a preteen daughter's

loneliness. spit flung  
from mother's tongue collides  
with voices slipping  
wraith-like out of her children,  
echoing off engorged squarefootage

—don't I know  
how lucky I am to live

here, amorphous. above  
catacomb bones  
delicate and sweet as coconut shreds,  
exquisitely dressed corpses  
not a soul can sense  
stitched into love

seats. plus, woods out back  
where the atrophied limbs of yesterday's  
sad girls grow into the ground  
and where mother was  
deflowered by a hand

mirror, and her blood slid beneath  
buxom mushroom caps  
and disappeared  
like the pollen of her

children's overblown hopes,  
which skitter thorn-sharp along  
endless floors...

## THE TRACK OF OUR RUSTY FORGOTTEN UNBLEMISHED LOVE

*with pieces of Urban Dictionary entries*

I was a nuthugger for Another Me (an anchor baby emo thrift whore) ever since pre-puberty when I once had to use the computer to look up a word, and I went to a site I shouldn't have, and got sucked in. I was confused, but that is the feeling you're supposed to get when the entire world all-of-a-sudden opens up to you.

a vagina is the box  
a penis comes in and  
a penis is the tool used  
to wean and convert  
lesbians and virgins  
into useful, productive  
members of society.

A virgin lesbian, I felt the deep sense of being a useless person, so this info spoke to Another Me. I discovered that she liked high-pitched guitar riffs, tight wool, ripped chucks and not washing her hair. She got softcore greasy, TV stoned, and wore only fabulous chocolate-smearred sloth-cloths, mattress worshipping in a windowless room, where she would frequently "forget" to take her pills, have bedgasms, cum dumpster fantasies, and sexercisms to curb shame, wishing she had a real-life person with whom to share all this. I told her I could be that person,

but she told me with those daggered, midnight-lined eyes: you don't pour my cereal. Whenever she went to jill off, it felt like I was hiking in Appalachia. I was very lonely, knowing I'd have to spend the rest of my ruined life with her. About a year ago, though, I finally found Another Me the real-life person for whom she was yearning. She and I melded into the best kind of emo thrift whore, and we talked to our person about how we were better poets than all those smarty-pants Twitney Spheres out there; we were real.

## MERMAID FREEPLAY

Kitchen mice and my sister cross  
through haloes of melted butter  
light. My sister knows all bodies

move toward violent gyration  
before they still and sink limb-spread  
into the pitch-licorice cosmos because

this is what she does every night:  
smoke weed and play Sims. Tangled

fists of spaghetti grow out of linoleum  
around her nook-for-now, coated in  
'Nilla Wafer sand. Her pixel family is  
motherlode cheat code wealthy. Mice

whisker-sweep slivers of dark  
chocolate, wire tails skirting  
trap wood. She allows cooking

fires to seduce the grim reaper,  
who knocks the matriarch—fond of trying  
for baby—to her knees, and had once  
came for her first Sims infant  
same time as a mouse found itself

dancing, clasped. My sister escaped  
to her car. Traffic cones' reflector-belts  
beamed light-beads on street mermaid's  
forest-green fins, jittery like the caught  
rodent's gnawed, eraser-pink tail.

She'd re-made the child (with some  
aesthetic improvements because of  
a free upgrade). At night, the mom had  
watched the ghost swim around  
the street. My sister hadn't killed  
someone real, but feels guilt. Her arrow  
had dragged the kid into being.

The mermaids remind her what is  
missing. They swirl gazelle-like  
in shallow school zones, zip sea-snake  
quick on freeways, quaking her car,

which is parked as she gets high  
before play, gazing at the moon-born  
maidens who dance around the Dollar Tree  
parking lot, stirring up wrappers  
and glass, stringing them into  
their hair—stuck yet ceaselessly  
moving; the hours slick off their backs.

## WICKED WITCH

She roams the hills, uprooting  
unripe fruit, kicking  
the sheets into a knot. I watch  
her from behind a curtain  
of bed hair, sinking beneath  
curdled moonlight, envious—  
the way she holds her breath  
and releases it  
over and over. She kneads her skin, hair  
a candy nimbus inching  
in velvet furls around  
the pillow. I close my eyes,  
clinging to beast kin  
hiking thorny Kumbricia,  
headed across a crystal river  
to the skirt. There I stew  
with trees, prey to the harpies  
of hell, waiting to be made  
into the paper on which she will  
write her enchantments. But  
I also want to crawl back  
to her, or crash into  
her body, gaze up spellbound  
as a sea victim washed ashore.  
I would re-learn how to live  
off her land, watching  
the world spin  
from inside her thighs.

## CAMP 24 WEEKS

on a fertile cliffside   girlsnboys in bubblegum cauls  
and crystal onesies tumble around   the brink   spit  
drips into twisted roots bloody pulp   they hidenseek  
crunching liquefied anti-limbs   the campers somersault  
over a flat square pool that gleams aluminum   splash  
Jurassic slipping back before the big bang   a conflagration  
pre-people tripping into one another exploding   slick skin  
raw ripped clothes keratin confetti kids squirming around  
the sharp wild grass of becoming   kicking their bare feet  
past the edge of a tick-riddled plateau   and lingering  
below the dark camp cliffside   a storm cellar collapses  
with placeless trembling   stigmas not formed fontanel  
shadows of skulls hovering until a metal stalk emerges  
from a slit in the viscous sunset to cancel them

## GENTLEMEN'S CLUB

Hecate steps across the rubber-scuffed stage, sticky  
wadded money collaging its edges. She plays peek-a-boo  
hoo-has, her psychopomp puppies clothed in spotlight.  
She drags a guy onstage by the belt and hovers over him,  
thighs casting angular paddle shadows on his bearded jaw.  
Hecate licks her thumb and drags it down her throat and  
around her left breast. She lactates blood-hungry locusts  
that scurry toward the crowd's victorious open mouths.  
Sparks erupt from off-stage canons rooted underground,  
where the restless atoms of saliva, limestone, and ovum  
sprouts dance with the dismantled bones of alcohol-drowned  
prairie flowers. Hecate hinges forward to hear the guy  
whimpering *don't you pity me?* as the locusts swarm;  
she closes her eyes and keeps dancing.



## CIRCE

i.

We sober sleep  
under the red and green lights  
dotting the Straits of Mackinac

suspended metal. Her whisper  
slick and soft as willowherb.  
Slender flowers tower  
colonies of beach grass  
along the rocky shore where  
two water bodies touch.

ii.

Kayaks scuffed and strapped.  
In the back, a flashlight  
flickering indigo  
LED on empty cans and bottles.

iii.

Our tent is a mansion  
in the Hiawatha woods,  
open-throated primrose  
blooms kiss the canvas,  
licking crystal dew.  
Sharp fuchsia flecks of  
enchanter's nightshade sugared  
with lost sand from Lake Huron.

iv.

A glance, and camping men  
drop—crawl away on raw palms,  
scabbed knees, tumbling—  
becoming hunched, rabid  
four-leggeds with fangs, crooked  
hocks, chestnut manes. Mucus-  
slobbery, stalking animal-dom,  
rotten air in their marrow.

We laugh at them. Our limbs  
weave together—new roots.

v.

Sound of her eyelashes fluttering  
against my right temple.  
We fly. We burrow

naked in a sleeping bag—  
I'm dragged into the burr-sticky  
underworld, dripping crimson  
petals, thick opiate mist.

Dusk, us salt-swimming into algae  
gowns below the shaky ivory  
that streaks the inland lake.

vi.

Long hike, lungs hot.

She is a bug-bitten milk pillar  
erect on the edge—rickety  
sandstone cliff. Leaked minerals  
paint what the tourists floating  
a calm Superior want to see.

Wind fights through velvet  
hair, slicks heavy August heat  
along her outstretched arm.  
At the end of it, gripped  
in chipped gold nails,  
a cup—dented and stained

Styrofoam from that morning's  
gas station mocha, microscopic  
suns reflected on the sleeve.

vii.

She sets it off soaring, surfing  
a cloudy downslope, shooting  
stars into a hissing whitecap.  
The lake looks so much more  
violent—light drowning in it—  
banging manganese, spit-up  
blotches of copper and iron.

## I TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

I have swallowed too much  
incorporeal potion over the years. I chose to  
so now I can't be in my body  
without losing control  
of my limbs. I flail around  
like a wounded gull begging  
for a nibble of unconditional forgiveness  
from my lover  
on whom I drip sloppy apologies  
after punching her  
for no good reason. I should not have  
and I should not have  
drunk all that  
potion. That's what I tell her.

## TOUCHING

Fetters can be flexible—

strands of hair sliding down a drain  
into the sea, soft as my stepfather's fingers

beneath my pajama top,  
where womanhood holds it breath—tense

as metastasis, the letters  
I've written my mom and thrown  
away—weightless,

the atmosphere as a baby first enters  
the world and its mother  
reaches between her legs to touch

the gory head, when  
a person dies on impact  
in a car accident, and glass shoots into the air

like foam off a crashing wave—a series  
of small eruptions,  
smoldering as

they settle into a single chain.

## MOTHER TITAN

would stroke the tired White Star  
Line where my life jacket pulled apart,  
nudge me toward the syringe-wielding  
rescuers who sparkled with the promise

of formaldehyde. She wouldn't let my body  
be forgotten, become feldspar. She would

dress me best, cooing soft maroon lips,  
and kiss my frozen elbow, marking my iliac  
injection—I am worthy of embalment,

she would tell me, tucking my hair, braided  
with ice crystals, mahogany, and a locket  
belonging to her own mother, behind my ear

—royal purple, cerulean-splotched, perfect  
match to her eye—open, sinking. She expires

on the tide, which she'd allowed to unpack her  
tired vessels till she was a deflated coat  
on rust-pocked taupe, bottom-feeders' haunt,  
hollow neighbor to the red swallowtail flags that  
ripple forever on white ceramic dishware.

## LESBO INFERNO

*with lines from Vita Sackville-West's letter to Virginia Woolf*

During the short few weeks we were just friends,  
the uncomfortable film of fear and longing stretched over me  
like a caul, and thoughts of you struck—fork-tongued  
lightning, a metallic blue antler leaving me  
rattled and bright, my mind balmy. Now I just miss you,  
in a quite simple desperate human way. You,  
with all your undumb letters and angry fistfuls  
of dogwood flowers, my Beatrice and Virgil both.  
You've stayed up with me as I've pondered the seductive  
edge of my life, how lovely it'd be to sleep on the train  
tracks, beside a scraggly patch of Michigan forest. You've marveled  
at my stunning lack of self-preservation, masking your own hurt  
in so exquisite a phrase it loses a little of its reality,  
and I believe that you are able to carry us both  
to the gauzy gates of paradise. Last I saw you,  
the air swelled, hot and thick, and we hid from it  
in the scrub-laced skirts of the sprawling dunes, which were  
gold as the orbs cast in the dewy nighttime streets  
back home. We crouched close, masticating  
sand and enchanter's nightshade with our back teeth.  
I am reduced to a thing that wants—it is incredible  
how essential to me you have become, like the moon  
you pull my body up to wash away the beach debris,  
the genes of Helios pumping light up and down your thighs  
as we clutch one another inside  
our tent, the planet spinning helplessly.

## I DREAMT MY MOM GAVE BIRTH AGAIN

no veins stretched or pulsing across her swollen stomach, perfect as a picture in a magazine, glossy flesh fresh out of the airbrush; no swarm of flies static in her ears, chasing the scent of the unburied rotten across Pontiac's crumbling skyline, where her mother was a girl; she's daisy clean and spritely, wearing polka dot undies, white and pink; no bed either, she's sitting straight-backed on a boulder, a flint sleek dense and self-aware as her, proud, performing the coveted magic trick of her gender; my stepdad stands behind her, a back brace, a shadow shaped like a rusty hatchet, a soon-to-be father of four total human beings, the half-siblings I won't know, really, until they're grown, the sky irrelevant, the almost-parents still as a photograph, framed by the void, moving fractal-by-fractal, close-lipped, faces content, my mom lifting her oversized gray tee and flexing a nub-winged pose, bringing her shoulder blades together, and the new baby slipping out encased in a wet cotton sack; it drops down a smooth ramp of rock into some water, which applauds with a splash and a quieting swallow for the successful feat, for my mom inflicting another life.

## UNREST HOME

i.

I think it's limestone, a form of sediment  
made from deceased sea creatures, ancient corpse-stacks  
compacted and landed in Ohio, where we've learned  
how to take the stone and grind it into white, into  
the dust that we blame when we cry and that we lift  
stainless steel buckets of at the factory where we make  
toothpaste America-striped before squeezing it onto  
a toothbrush and poking around inside chasm mouths,  
polishing our smiles with the crushed  
atoms of a creature who'd shook and curled fetal  
sweet before stiffening to the tide, others died on top of her,  
and they all dragged across a cold, dry-to-the-fiery-core  
continent inside a rock, unable to see the sea or sky or a cut  
of sun, to sense a body like yours next to mine  
standing in front of a paste-draped sink, fallen  
long hairs looped into shapes and letters I try to read  
until we spit foam, send the dead animals home.

ii.

I'd like to sit by the frog-infested pond, make  
music for us, brush the peach skin sunset, untangle  
fish-gut clouds, string them like chains  
of wildflowers along the spines of faint airplane exhaust.  
You suggest I play the empty bucket, so I  
pick up its scuffed plastic and find the dead bouquet  
it'd hidden—a huddled tangle, crumbling halo, ring of raw  
sugar at the bottom of a Starbucks cup. I set my head  
down on the wood of the dock. Between creaky beams,  
there is gold. I think we waste so much  
time—counting ruby dapples on dirty feet,  
finding constellations in the chocolate  
chips on my face, tracing confused veins  
and ugly hairs on our bodies. You talk so loud,  
but I don't mind—I taste the late-night smiles  
under your eyes, lay my head and harmonize  
with the achy indigo swell and sweaty pillows.

iii.

Old women, we sit inside the limestone  
and look out at twist-trunked trees that stretch



down into soggy grass, slick sticks kissing poison  
to the soil, shaking. When there's a tremor,  
a leaf twitching from a hit raindrop, we can't feel it.  
I watch a soaked pile of leaves spill down a slope—  
sewage sludge, gutter wrappers glittering on our two a.m.  
walk to the park when we need a break from all  
the bed, we firesiders spider-swinging, looking up  
at city sky—a jaundice slate cough, a couple satellites  
winking our grid-existence. I think, lie to me.  
Tell me your stretchmark is a wishbone, my prize  
for winning the game you don't think exists. Tell me  
the inside of your mind, let it splat off the gray-scale  
moon's icy curve, tangle with this river's barbed-wire bits,  
settle into a chunk of flowerpot like the one on  
a dusty sill my eyes find when I look past your body  
and your hair—whisper-kiss of baker's chocolate  
in the humid mid-day, a fight against the forest's coarse  
mud-combed ponytails of roots that reach into puddles.

iv.

Young women, we sit beside the campfire  
atop our sweet-stuffed stomachs and track rapid  
curls of smoke that loop like a woman's rogue  
hair strand post hike to that jutting indigo boulder—  
huge ocean vessel with octopi trees hugging the hull,  
black tentacle roots leech-clinging to her  
steerage windows, drawing out cherry jewels. Parasitic  
chips—crumbs in our bed—peel off her underbelly,  
finding each other under the mucky, treasure-strewn debris  
sheets, weaving with nail clippings and skin  
into a long skirt of Walmart jersey—warmth tube, armor  
of pink scales, sugar-butter sea slime wrapping to protect  
the part of a person that's left after she is cleaned  
and consumed, rubbed raw and reborn in the salt water  
dripping from you, slipping from beneath  
the invisible spider leg edge of a crooked contact lens.  
I'm listening to the tide—your sleep-hums—scared,  
remembering the time you told me we're all homemade.  
I see no place to be but fireside—eating, folding  
origami birds out of candy wrappers, thinking about  
our initials scratched next to each other on the limestone.